

Magnus Andersson
Sweden

Interview

'The guitar has become an instrument of too much passive entertainment.'

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Lance Bosman

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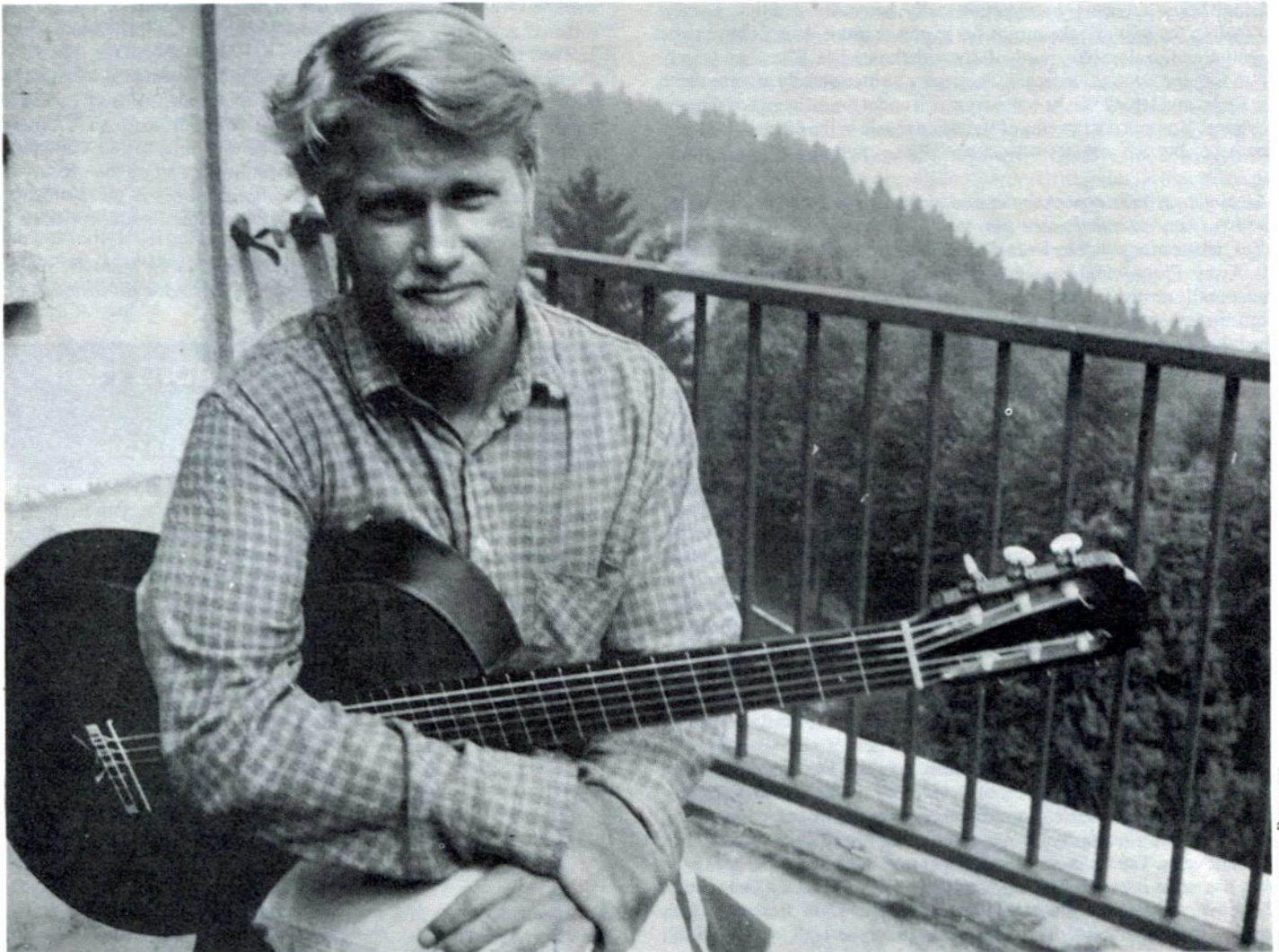


Photo: Lance Bosman

Disenchantment bordering on outright challenge of the established programme of unrelated guitar miniatures is becoming increasingly widespread with emergent guitarists. These new musical outlooks manifest in many directions but generally point more to changing rather than extending a repertoire that has stultified over the decades. One such progressive, Magnus Andersson, a 24 year old Swedish guitarist, is committed to programmes of longer and substantial works with stylistic continuity. Prominent in his concerts are contemporary compositions, Donatoni's Algo, Goffredo Petrassi's Nunc, plus original new pieces, all calling for maximum concentration from both player and listener. Andersson's involvement with contemporary music, realised early in his studies, received further stimulus through his sympathetic teachers; Roland Bengtsson from Stockholm, William Grandeson at Trinity College, Siegfried Behrend and Angelo Gilardino.

While not condemning the mixed programme, Magnus considers that confinement to that kind of concert is positively unhealthy, regarding devotees of sweet-variety music, wallowing in the guitar and preoccupied with the instrument in itself, as voyeurs. A blunt statement, which he supports by way of demonstrating the guitar's full dynamic and percussive potential on the platform. New works composed with these qualities in mind are arranged so as to be the centrepiece of his programme, flanked perhaps by the less radical but equally wide ranging complete set of Villa Lobos studies. Lance Bosman

What I mean about the fetish attitude among guitarists is a relation that I have noticed as an observer without ever having bothered to study the reason. It is surely psychological, one with many facets and possible reasons: the instruments character, position in musical life, its players, and so on, everything interacting where there is a continuous concern with nails, strings, comparing guitars and different players. These superficial criteria, as well as the contact with inferior music, inevitably leads to narcissism - a narcissism where the instrument itself is the holy object over and above its creative potential, and so becoming a fetish. It can be compared with womens' concern for all types of ornaments or men with their cars. There are other shades to this statement besides the sexual which is just one aspect; and I'm aware that I have sketched it superficially, but let us for the moment leave it so.

Concerning the Villa Lobos studies, I think they were conceived in this way, to be played as a suite. Analysing them will show a logical sequence of keys and contrasts. I have calculated this approach from the prelude-like opening of the first study to the strong, energetic ending, which I see as a kind of cadence from E minor to the final study in A minor. And I see this even with the division between them: the first six are more study-like, whereas the last six are more as pieces.

There is a long tradition of mistakes made in the performance of his music. From what I understand of his playing and conducting, Villa Lobos was very strict on rhythm but full of life and energy, and this must

not be lost in his music. So it is a combination of a romantic mind with a 20th century personality, a mind full of rhythm and forward energy. Within the studies you find a mind that has projected a personality. I think that you have to look at him as a musical culture than simply a spontaneous musician. So the pieces should be strictly played, faithful to what is written; they are exactly notated. For instance, the signs *piu mosso* and *meno mosso*, faster and slower, are not often followed.

Couldn't a contradiction be read into this in that on one side they are romantic in idiom, and on the other, that they shouldn't be played with romantic indulgence?

I don't know if that is a contradiction really, because romanticism can be a feeling for life, and the means for expressing this doesn't have to be sentimental, salon-like, particularly with the studies. These are largely free from indigenous elements. They were written shortly after he came to Paris, and I think that he was very much under the influence of the new culture. You can find strains of Brazilian music in the 8th and 9th study perhaps, but it's not obvious, especially in rhythm.

Also among your repertoire is an original by a Swedish composer, which is an extended piece too, isn't it?

Yes, written for guitar by Sven-David Sandstrom. The name of the work is *Away From* which suggests its form. It starts with ideas that are eventually destroyed, they diverge from their source; they are disturbed by other elements which make it impossible for the first idea to continue. In a way it's pessimistic, reflecting life today, that it is so difficult to keep to principles, to believe in development. He wrote it with the guitar very much in mind and so he's inclined to use open strings a lot, meaning that he combines them with stopped ones. In fact the scale he starts with is close to the Phrygian, open guitar tuning, and includes bare 4ths and 5ths which the melody arises from. This achieves a tonal opening, and from that, chromatics are gradually introduced, creating fragmentation with rhythmic acceleration. It illustrates one line from an important movement in music today. Composers of this generation, born from the early 40s have a way of using tonality with a completely new approach, not with tonal regions in the romantic way and not with a tonality that always draws the music back to a centre; this can finish anywhere and yet still use tonal resources. This is a current phenomenon, difficult to summarise, but I've noticed that coming to many of the younger generation of composers.

This piece is a long work, something like 20 minutes, beginning slowly but soon speeding up. The long line dissipates and breaks into chromatic fragments, the smallest you can get, of just two-note very expressive phrases. So it ranges from long melodic arches to these two-note fragments. It's a sort of search for finding a fixed point, in a way reflecting our search for a fixed point in life that we strive for in society today which is becoming more complicated, with fewer things to believe in. The following section does not fragment the line into 2nds but has wide intervals leaping across open strings; then a fast section becomes very staccato with big leaps over the whole fretboard with large sounding chords. The piece finishes on the 18th fret with a full chord, a final cry trying for release.

Drawing upon the guitar's full capacity, he must have had knowledge of its fingerboard. Did you suggest possibilities in this?

Sandstrom has written one piece already for the guitar so he was at home with it, though he had no true idea how to produce various timbres: so we spoke on how to generate these effects, plus the use of open and stopped strings. With this knowledge and other resources like pizzicato and percussive possibilities, he could conceive ideas and expressions.

Many of these, as I say, are centred around open strings with large interval leaps to create dimension.

To give what I consider breadth to my performances, I have a ten string guitar tuned like the lute and with this I play the lute music of Bach. There are also pieces written for it, two by Maurice Ohana, his *Tiento* and the one I perform, *Si le jour paraît*, meaning *If the Day comes*. This name is inspired by a Goya etching in which monsters are looking up to the star speckled sky, waiting for the day to come. And if the day comes those monsters will disappear, they will be destroyed with its arrival. He wrote in a letter, where do we find light in 1980. And it's true, it's just as dark, even darker now with our global problems. The impetus for this work was an incident, a murder in 1963 by Franco's squads who tortured and killed an envoy visiting Spain. From this Ohana was so grieved that he composed this work as a kind of homage. He was to express another point too, because the central movement is a *Plainte* and *Tombeau* consisting of seven pieces of which the first is *Timbre* meaning *Prelude* in flamenco terminology. It then goes through different moods finishing with *Alba* or *Dawn*, the last piece. Perhaps the day will come though this is not clear at the end of the work - it's deliberately inconclusive. Also associated with it is the philosophy relating to the Southern Hemisphere, the whole feeling for life. *The musical language, is this tonal or serial.*

It has impressionistic strains. His musical background is Spanish though he is Gibraltense. He injects rhythms from African music, at times

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polyrhythmic. What is very clear is the Spanish culture, he evokes the mediaeval and de Falla with instrumental colour derived from Debussy. I think that these ideas are fine for the guitar because it's so suited to the impressionist idiom. But it's not tonal; it uses clusters, a lot of colours and is at times Stravinsky-like in rhythmic strength, forward pressing.

Another long and percussive work that you play, Donatoni's Algo. What sort of content has this?

It literally means 'something'. This also expands on its own and in a way is tonal too, from the note C whose octave interrupts fast passages. There is also a conflict between chords C major and minor and major and minor thirds. Unlike the last piece, this draws heavily on percussive effects. In the second of its two sections, short episodes follow one another, and in the second of these there is a lot of percussion, striking the left hand as well as the fingers on the strings, and on different parts of the guitar body; in all, a way of producing percussive melody, you can say. This is just one of the episodes where he concentrates on a particular idea, presenting it as an object in itself. The third episode is chromatic, clusters, again with open strings moving very fast which develop into big chords whose kernals are also major and minor thirds. And the last episode has flurried repeated notes also like chords, where you cannot detect individual notes even though they're frequently interrupted by C which has been the central element of the work. This C is never fully cast out, and the whole piece finishes with the chord E flat, C, E, the notes on which it opened.

Are there many other guitarists in Sweden championing new music?

No there are not many showing a positive interest in the contemporary field, which I think is really the most important for the instrument. It is in this that the guitar can reveal its full potential, at least within this culture. I don't mention jazz or rock because these are expressions of our time in the real way. The classical guitar, there are many things not yet done, and this is the possible thing about the instrument: it has a large prospect, and in contemporary work it's a very flexible instrument: it can be more aggressive than we thought; not like the tradition that came from Tarrega and so on, which is very much opposed I think, and the reason why it has taken so long to have really contemporary works written for it. The people that established the instrument came from a tradition that was foreign to contemporary thinking. The guitar has become an instrument of too much passive entertainment; it doesn't provoke anyone to think.

Of course, the argument against this is that people don't want to leave the pressure of the day; the rush hour and such, and then subject themselves to more tension in their leisure time.

Yes this is true, but the traditional repertoire is music meant for entertainment. It has its place in society today, necessary for relaxation; but if guitar programmes continue this way they will consume themselves through a lack of new values, of activity and vitality.

Are you prepared to continue this way without compromising?

This is a problem I live with daily, because of the player I am, I'm drawn towards a small audience, almost playing for myself. In practical terms, a mixed programme, not to be a specialist, I think this is the way of evading the problem of being selective with the audience. Well, after all, it comes down to whether you believe that music is a way of communication, a language for conceiving an idea and presenting it. So if you think like this, the music has to be presented not in a cheap way, put into a programme as a curiosity. This has happened a lot and I'm opposed to it: placing a contemporary original in the middle of popular pieces. I want to position this music as the main focus of my programmes, which might mean appearing at the end of them, or

somewhere that throws them into full light. That for the audience will be a very positive thing to hear; it's something I'm working at, and I haven't completely solved it. The tendency in performing modern music is to put the emphasis on a traditional, perhaps average repertoire, with the modern piece as just spice, maybe to contrast, without it being the significant point. Long intense works have been composed of course, although they are very few; but how to find a way out of the isolated situation. And when speaking of an isolated situation I don't mean that they're not exposed to an audience, which they are very much, having a wide popularity that few instruments earn, and this is good. No, I mean that the guitar is isolated as an artistic instrument. A close look upon its repertoire from the classical period until recent times clearly reveals this. At no time has it been within the mainstream of musical thought and expression but, instead kept up a sentimental tradition that has prevented it from developing its true potential, a potential that is rich and flexible outside the major - minor system, above what was used in the classical and romantic era, which was structural. It is bound up with this tradition and a break with the Tarrega school has to be done. Whether the repertoire will move in a new direction or not depends on how much the guitar and its players can free themselves from prevailing habits and tradition. And it is not a question of longer or shorter works as such, but of substance. As a result, the activity will certainly become wider, more inspiring and richer both in ideas and in audience set-up.

The problem I suspect that you have with the performances of these pieces is that they are not only new but are also quite long. Without including miniatures you have to consider their durations in your planning, so that they reach a high point with back-up either side.

When you have large works like these then the idea is to set the programme a little bit longer or have an interval preceding them, to give a sort of rest; and then they are heard as themselves, surrounded by nothing but themselves. Successful programmes that I've played to audiences responsive to new music were combined with accessible works, say the Villa Lobos studies. These present a way of handling the guitar which is more aggressive, using ranging dynamics without being foreign in language; a language that we are used to but one that is also expansive and so acts as a preparation.

A high level of technique must be essential to these enterprises.

I don't believe that you can divide form from substance: technique in playing the instrument presents the form. Though I don't agree with hammering out speedy scales just for the sake of it. I go with the theory that the musician should first be concerned with the sound, and that's where he starts: not with the speed but the quality of sound. I regard the guitar, as I said, as a very flexible instrument; and one should be able to control its gamut of sounds. Most guitarists have problems with articulating scales and arpeggios at speed; the mistake lies in the way it's guided, it should lead to new things which it can.

Over and above dexterity, are there special techniques called for?

The Tarrega-Segovia technique can't serve, it doesn't cater for the speed required or the dynamic range involved. I've found that speed and the dynamic capacity are bound into each other, for it comes down to finding a support, the right way of holding your hand and controlling it. Let me say that I'm not inclined to effects for themselves, I'm not close to that kind of music, like that written by David Bedford. I want the music to be contained, where it has a definite purpose and is calculated. There was a time when I played aleatoric music, an extreme before I drew myself in; but now I'm more conscious of specific impacts, their significance.

The first two pieces mentioned require nothing in the way of special techniques. They are complicated technically but within classical technique; I mean they are written for a player who has taken in the level of the twelve studies or the larger works of the Italian guitarists; it calls for nothing outside that, no forces outside tradition. Where they differ is in musical substance.

Besides the task of memorising music of this length you also have to absorb, assimilate and commit yourself to an interpretation that may vary with each performance.

It depends on the way I'm working for a performance, I accept this as a challenge. The Donatoni piece I got into my hands shortly before its performance. Beforehand I didn't know what to play at the concert, there was nothing I felt positive about; so I had to put a lot of effort in at that time. I was also working on another, Petrassi's Nunc, so it's difficult to say how long it takes to learn and absorb these because there are other pressures as well. It is hard this pressure but you learn a lot, it's a discipline; you become stronger if you are able to do it; it's a moral teaching for yourself.

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